

POSSESSING PRUDENCE

BY AMY WENTWORTH STONE

I

'A LIE's an abomination unto the Lord a hundred and twenty-four, a lie's an abomination unto the Lord a hundred and twenty-five, a lie's an abomination unto the Lord a hundred and twenty-six,' recited Prudence Jane, and paused.

'Go on,' said Aunt Annie, looking up from her sewing and fixing her eyes severely on the small blue back across the room.

Prudence Jane, with the heels of her little ankle-ties together and her hands clasped tightly behind her, was standing in the corner, saying what was known in the family as her punish-sentence. Whenever she had been unusually naughty she had to say one four hundred times up in Aunt Annie's room. It was, no doubt, a silly sort of punishment, but it was one that Prudence Jane strongly objected to — and that, after all, is the essence of a punishment. Prudence Jane had seven teasing, mimicking brothers, and whenever one of them caught her saying a punish-sentence it was days before she heard the last of it. Already in the garden below there was audible a shrill voice singing, 'A lie is an abom-i-na-tion un-to the Lord,' to the tune of 'Has anybody here seen Kelly?' And out of the corner of her eye, that was supposed to be fastened on the rosebuds of Aunt Annie's wall-paper, Prudence Jane could see an impudent little person in corduroys, straddling the gravel walk and squinting up at the window.

'Is "a lie's an abomination" in the Bible?' inquired Prudence Jane.

'Yes,' said Aunt Annie, 'go on.'

'Where?' demanded Prudence Jane.

'Where?' repeated Aunt Annie a little blankly. 'Why — why — in the middle of the Bible. Don't you listen to the minister, Prudence Jane?'

'The middle of the minister's Bible?' pursued Prudence Jane.

'Yes, of course,' said Aunt Annie, 'Prudence Jane, if you don't go on at once I shall have you say it five hundred times.'

'A lie's an abomination unto the Lord a hundred and twenty-seven,' resumed Prudence Jane hastily.

Prudence Jane's sentences varied from day to day, it being Aunt Annie's idea to fit the sentence to the crime whenever possible. Thus, for being late to school it was, naturally, 'Procrastination is the thief of time.' While for telling Lena, the cook, that Uncle Arthur had said she was more of a lady than Aunt Annie, the sentence had been nothing less than, 'Truth crushed to earth will rise again.'

This particular fib had been very disastrous in its consequences. We will not dwell upon them here. They make a story in themselves. Suffice it to say that there was no possible excuse for Prudence Jane.

It was otherwise with the fib for which she was this morning serving a sentence up in Aunt Annie's room. Those who also have been named after their two grandmothers will at once forgive Prudence Jane for telling the

new minister, the very first time she met him, that her name was Imogen Rose. It was, to be sure, a stupid little fib, and was therefore quite unworthy of Prudence Jane. For Prudence Jane almost never told stupid little fibs. The fibs of Prudence Jane were little masterpieces, with a finish and distinction all their own. Her brother Will, who adored her, and had a large mind, declared when he came home from college that she was the greatest mistress of imaginative fiction since George Eliot. Her Aunt Annie, who had not had the advantages of a college course, and who roomed with Prudence Jane, said that she was a 'simple little liar.'

Now this was unfair of Aunt Annie, for whatever else Prudence Jane might be, she was *not* simple. Even her looks belied her. With her big confiding eyes, as round and blue as two forget-me-nots, and her pale yellow hair held demurely back from her forehead by a blue ribbon fillet, she gave an impression of gentle innocence that was altogether misleading.

'She is so like little Bertie,' dear old Grandma Piper would say; 'that same frail, flower-like look that he had toward the last. I almost tremble sometimes. Have n't you noticed a transparency about her lately, Annie?'

But Aunt Annie never had.

It may be said in passing that there was only one person to whom Prudence Jane was really transparent, and that was her youngest brother, Peter. Peter was a square, solid little person, with a vacant countenance; but nothing important that Prudence Jane did escaped him.

'Just to look into that sweet little face is enough for me,' Grandma Goodwin would declare; 'I don't want anybody to tell *me* that Prudence Jane is untruthful. No child could look straight at you out of her little soul as she always does, and tell a fib. The

trouble is they don't understand her at home. I've always said Annie Piper had a suspicious nature.'

To do Aunt Annie justice, it should be said that rooming with Prudence Jane did not tend to cultivate in one a nature that was trustful and confiding. And yet at heart Prudence Jane was really not at all the incorrigible little fibber that she seemed. She told fibs, not because she wished to deceive, but because the dull facts of life were so much less interesting than the lively little romances that she could make up out of her own head. When one is a creative genius one naturally rebels at being shackled to anything so tedious as a fact. Prudence Jane, looking back over a day, could rarely separate the things that had really happened from those that she had invented.

Her brother Horace, who was studying law, said that he would give a hundred dollars to see Prudence Jane on the witness stand. This was one night at supper when she was being cross-examined by Aunt Annie. For five minutes she had kept the family spell-bound by a circumstantial account of how that afternoon she had seen an automobile truck, loaded with a thousand boxes of eggs, go over the embankment. With eggs at sixty-five cents a dozen this was really a very shocking tale.

'Prudence Jane,' said Aunt Annie, who had private sources of information, 'you know well enough that no truck went over the embankment. Whatever do you mean by telling such an outrageous fib?'

Prudence Jane looked across the supper table at her aunt out of two round candid eyes.

'That was n't a fib; that was just a story,' she explained.

'Well, it was n't true; and stories that are n't true are very wicked,' said Aunt Annie with decision.

'Are all the stories in books true?'

inquired Prudence Jane, the picture of innocence behind her bowl of bread and milk.

'No,' Aunt Annie was forced to admit, 'but stories written in books are different. The writers don't mean for us to believe them.'

'Do they say so in the books?' 'went on Prudence Jane relentlessly.

'Of course not,' said Aunt Annie, 'we know their stories are n't true, so they don't deceive us.'

'But you always know *my* stories are n't true too,' objected Prudence Jane, 'so I don't deceive you either.'

'Prudence Jane,' said Aunt Annie, 'I shan't argue with you. You are a very naughty little girl. I sometimes think that you don't belong to us at all; you're so different from your brothers.'

This was true. All the other little Pipers had been simple, virtuous children, with imaginations under perfect control — 'a remarkable family' everybody had said, until the Pipers became quite complacent about themselves. This was why Prudence Jane seemed like such a judgment upon them. They had waited long and patiently, as Aunt Annie put it, for Providence to see fit to send them a dear little girl to inherit her grandmothers' names — and they received Prudence Jane. Had she appeared at an earlier date, or had there been another girl in the family, she might have escaped either the Prudence or the Jane. But for fifteen years little masculine Pipers had arrived in the household with unbroken regularity, and been named, one by one, after all the available grandfathers and uncles. For the last one, indeed, there had not been even a cousin left, and he had been christened by common consent Peter Piper. And still the grandmothers waited.

From the moment, therefore, when bluff old Doctor Jones looked in upon

a parlor full of aunts, and announced that it was 'a girl at last, by Jove,' there had been no choice left for Prudence Jane. The only point discussed in the solemn family conclave was as to whether she should not be Jane Prudence.

'Oh, for mercy's sake, call the poor little kid Jurisprudence, and be done with it,' said a flippant uncle — and that had settled it. Prudence Jane was duly entered at the end of the list in the middle of the Family Bible, and her career began.

Through eight years she was just unmitigated Prudence Jane, — not a syllable of it could ever be omitted lest one grandmother or the other be slighted, — and then suddenly one day she decided that it was a combination no longer to be borne. She hated her name with all her little soul; therefore she would discard it and take another. This sounded simple, but there were, in fact, several complications. The most important was Aunt Annie. Never a really progressive spirit, in this matter of names Aunt Annie showed herself to be an out-and-out stand-patter.

'You wish that you had been called Gwendolin?' she echoed in horror, as she combed out the pale yellow hair at bed-time. 'Why, Prudence Jane, I'm ashamed of you. Gwendolin is a very silly name indeed, and you have two such noble ones. I only hope that you will grow up to be like the beautiful grandmamas who gave them to you' — which was a truly lovely little bit of optimism on Aunt Annie's part.

II

Prudence Jane did not consult Aunt Annie further. That very night, however, staring up into the darkness from her little white bed, she decided upon a new combination. And when the Reverend Mr. Sanders came up to her the

next day after Sunday School, and inquired kindly what little girl this was, Prudence Jane was quite prepared to tell him, with the transparent look that so frightened dear old Grandma Piper, that it was Imogen Rose.

She fully meant to inform her family of this interesting change as soon as she got home from Sunday School, but when she tiptoed into the parlor Aunt Annie, in all the majesty of her plum-colored satin, was sitting in a straight-backed chair reading *The Christian Word and Work*, and looked unresponsive to new ideas. So Prudence Jane tiptoed out again, to await a more favorable moment. Unfortunately, before that moment arrived she had a falling-out with her brother Peter. This was a mistake, for it was the part of prudence always to make an ally of Peter Piper. He had discovered Prudence Jane flat on the floor in a corner of the library, scratching her name out of the Family Bible with an ink eraser.

'Did the minister tell you to write Imogen in?' he inquired blandly, as he stood in the doorway with his hands in his corduroys.

'None of your business,' retorted Prudence Jane, closing the Bible with a bang and sitting down upon it.

The result was that Peter Piper, from whom nothing was ever hidden, went off and told Aunt Annie all about Imogen Rose and the minister. Whereupon Aunt Annie, with her usual limited point of view, had pronounced it a very monstrous fib indeed, and had sent Prudence Jane instantly into the corner.

'A lie's an abomination unto the Lord three hundred and ninety-eight, a lie's an abomination unto the Lord three hundred and ninety-nine, a lie's an abomination unto the Lord four hundred,' finished Prudence Jane at a canter, and whisked around from her corner.

Aunt Annie beckoned with solemn finger.

'To-morrow, Prudence Jane,' she said, looking across the sewing-table, 'I am going to take you to see the minister and you must tell him yourself what your real name is, and what a dreadful story you have told him. I shall ask him what he thinks should be done with a little girl who cannot speak the truth. I'm sure I don't know what he will say. But we can't deceive a minister. They always know when they hear a fib.'

'Do they?' asked Prudence Jane, openly interested, her round eyes fastened upon her aunt.

'Always,' replied Aunt Annie rashly.

'Then why do I have to go and tell him?' asked Prudence Jane.

'Prudence Jane,' said Aunt Annie, 'you are a very saucy little girl, and I'm sure I don't know what is going to become of you.'

Prudence Jane walked slowly out of the room. She was considering what Aunt Annie had said about ministers, and she wondered if it were true. As she went tripping down the stairs she decided to put the Reverend Mr. Sanders to a test the very next time she met him. And that was why it was so surprising, when she peeked through the hall window at the foot of the stairs, to behold him diligently wiping his feet on the door-mat.

'How do you do,' said Prudence Jane politely, as she opened the door.

'Why, good afternoon, Imogen,' said the minister, shaking hands cordially.

Prudence Jane made the little knix that she had learned at German school. It was always the finishing touch to Prudence Jane. The Reverend Mr. Sanders looked down upon it with a most friendly smile.

'Is your aunt at home?' he asked, placing his hat on the table and following Prudence Jane into the parlor.

'Yes,' she said with simple candor. A fib of that sort was quite beneath Prudence Jane.

Then she sat down on a velvet sofa, spread out her little blue skirt, folded her hands in her lap and crossed her ankle-ties. She had never in her life looked so much like little Bertie. The Reverend Mr. Sanders, regarding her from an opposite chair, waited for her to open her lips and say, 'Speak, Lord, for thy servant heareth.' Instead, this is what she said:—

'Is Eliza Anna Bomination your grandmother?'

'I beg pardon,' said the Reverend Mr. Sanders.

'Is she dead and gone to heaven, and that's why you say "unto the Lord"?'

continued Prudence Jane.

'I wonder, Imogen,' he said, 'if you would mind beginning over again.'

'I say, is Eliza Anna Bomination your grandmother?' repeated Prudence Jane. 'Aunt Annie says she's written down in the middle of your Bible where all people's relations are, and she sounded like a grandmother; they always have such horrid names.'

The minister looked across at the velvet sofa with eyes that entirely contradicted the gravity of his face.

'No,' he said, 'I'm sorry, but she is n't. I wish she were. I never heard of such a jolly grandmother.'

'Is she an aunt?' pursued his small interlocutor.

'I'm afraid that she's not even related by marriage,' he replied.

'Is n't she written down in the middle of your Bible at all?' said Prudence Jane.

The minister shook his head.

'No,' he said, 'I'm afraid not.'

'Then Aunt Annie told a whopper,' announced Prudence Jane with satisfaction.

'We should not malign the absent,' said the Reverend Mr. Sanders. 'And

that being the case, suppose you go up at this point, Imogen, and tell your Aunt Annie that I am here.'

Prudence Jane wondered what 'maligning the absent' was. She distrusted gentlemen who made cryptic remarks of this sort. It was a way her brother Horace had. She saw that the moment had now arrived to test Aunt Annie's theory about ministers and fibs.

'She can't come down,' she replied.

'Can't come down?' repeated the minister.

'No,' said Prudence Jane, looking at him out of the depths of her forget-me-not eyes, 'she's washed her hair.'

'Oh,' said the Reverend Mr. Sanders, in the tone of one who finds the conversation getting definitely beyond him.

At this moment an apparition with a round face and a pair of corduroy shoulders suddenly darkened the open window.

'A *lie* is an a-bom-i-na-tion un-to the Lord,' it sang and, catching sight of the clerical back, vanished hastily.

'Interesting chorus,' observed the Reverend Mr. Sanders.

Prudence Jane paid no heed to this interruption.

'It's hanging down her back now,' she pursued, launching upon the details with her usual aplomb. 'It comes clear down to here.' And standing up, she indicated a point halfway between her ankle-ties and the bottom of her ridiculous skirt.

The minister gazed fascinated. Prudence Jane sat down again.

'She washed it with Packer's Tar Soap,' she said, her eyes fixed upon her victim.

She was quite unable to make out whether Aunt Annie was right about ministers or not. The Reverend Mr. Sanders looked like the Sphinx.

'She gave a piece to a gentleman once,' went on Prudence Jane, warming to her work. 'He was n't a very

nice gentleman. He was a — a —' she hesitated a moment over a fitting climax, — 'a — a Piskerpalyan,' she finished.

'Mercy!' said the Reverend Mr. Sanders, finding his voice at last. 'And what, may I ask, are you?'

Prudence Jane looked faintly surprised.

'I,' she said, with pride and composure, 'am an Orthy Dox Congo Gationist.'

'Yes,' said the Reverend Mr. Sanders, 'so I suspected from the first.'

And now *what* did he mean by that, thought Prudence Jane to herself. She could no longer see his face. He had turned abruptly in his chair and was watching something through the aperture in the portières.

Prudence Jane heard the thump of a pair of shoes plodding up the stairs and along the upper hall. She knew that it was Peter Piper going to find Aunt Annie. There was a stir in the room overhead, then the muffled sound of a rocking-chair suddenly abandoned, followed by the swish of skirts coming along the passage and down the stairs.

Prudence Jane sat with parted lips on the edge of the sofa.

The Reverend Mr. Sanders looked decidedly nervous, but he rose and presented a bold front to whatever might be coming to him through those portières. In another moment they were pushed hastily aside, and Aunt Annie, crowned with a quite faultless coiffure, hurried into the room.

'Why, Mr. Sanders,' she said, 'I did not know until this minute that you were here.'

Then her eye fell upon her niece. Prudence Jane was now standing in front of the sofa, tracing the pattern of

the carpet with the toe of an ankletie.

'Why didn't you tell me that Mr. Sanders was waiting?' demanded Aunt Annie sternly.

Prudence Jane continued to gaze at the carpet.

'Mr. Sanders,' said Aunt Annie, who never postponed a disagreeable duty, 'we have a little girl here who cannot speak the truth, and we are going to ask you to tell us what becomes of people who tell wrong stories.'

The Reverend Mr. Sanders looked ill at ease.

'Come here,' continued Aunt Annie, holding out her hand toward the velvet sofa.

Prudence Jane moved reluctantly across the room.

'And now,' went on the voice of the accuser, 'she has even deceived her minister, and she has come to make her little confession. Tell Mr. Sanders,' directed Aunt Annie, 'the truth about that wicked fib.'

'Which one?' inquired Prudence Jane meekly.

'You know very well which,' answered her exasperated aunt, 'the last one.'

Prudence Jane lifted her blue eyes from the carpet and looked straight at the unfortunate Mr. Sanders.

'She did n't give any of it to the Piskerpalyan,' she said.

Then she turned and walked discreetly through the portières. She felt that it was no moment to stay and learn what became of little girls who told whoppers.

'Did n't give who what?' she could hear Aunt Annie saying vaguely on the other side of the curtains. But Prudence Jane decided to let her minister explain.

